Libraries & Well-Being

A Case Study from The New York Public Library

2024

New York Public Library

Penn
University of Pennsylvania

“Public libraries—those enduring and adaptive positive institutions—provide us with information, inspiration, and connection for staying resilient in adversity and for imagining and creating more fulfilling lives and thriving communities. This report helps us see and relate to libraries as important resources for, and centers of, flourishing.”

—Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman

Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology and Founding Director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania

Welcome

November
2024

The white paper you're about to read is a contribution to positive psychology, a field studying the traits, experiences, and institutions enabling individuals and communities to thrive. It is the result of an evolving partnership between The New York Public Library's Strategy and Public Impact team and the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project within The University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center.

Our two teams—situated within the largest public library system in the country, and a center established by the founder of positive psychology, Dr. Martin Seligman—share an interest in exploring the ways public and cultural institutions contribute to individual well-being and support flourishing communities. Our collaboration focuses on illuminating a new dimension in the study of well-being—namely, the positive impact of public libraries on individual and collective flourishing.

NYPL regularly surveys its patrons to understand and improve how the Library fits into—and adds value to—their lives. We strive to identify the unique power of public libraries, pinpointing precise mechanisms of positive impact, so that we can preserve and strengthen that impact. When designing our latest system-wide patron survey, we were inspired by Dr. Seligman's book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* to incorporate measures of well-being into our questions to capture a unique type of impact that has been rarely measured in library spaces before.

This inspiration was guided by the overarching research question: do patrons perceive that their use of the Library positively impacts their well-being? If so, in which ways?

Patrons responding to NYPL's system-wide survey overwhelmingly self-reported that the Library did, indeed, have a positive impact on their well-being. Dr. Seligman's PERMA model posits five building blocks of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Patrons' responses to structured and open-ended survey questions pointed to a Library impact that spans all five PERMA dimensions to improve their professional, academic, and personal lives. Further, respondents highlighted important aspects of public space that can engender PERMA experiences and support flourishing through personal transformation.

Continued

The Humanities and Human Flourishing Project provided expert guidance in validating and contextualizing these survey results. This marked the beginning of our working relationship, the first product of which is this white paper outlining public libraries' relevance to positive psychology and providing evidence that public libraries serve as centers of well-being within their communities.

We look forward to continuing this collaboration in the future, conducting research together that will further illuminate the role of public libraries in the promotion of the well-being of individuals and communities across the country.

In the meantime, we hope you'll be informed and inspired by the encouraging findings outlined in this report.

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This report is presented in partnership by The New York Public Library Strategy and Public Impact team and the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project at the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania as part of an ongoing collaboration to study and advocate for the role of public libraries within the communities they serve. To learn more, visit: **nypl.org/wellbeing**

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Libraries & Well-Being

Summary & Key Takeaways

Findings from a 2023 survey of NYPL patrons show that the vast majority of responding patrons report that the Library positively contributes to their well-being. Our analysis of survey results, informed by positive psychology's PERMA model of well-being, indicates that this impact occurs across three stages of flourishing, comprising 20 factors of benefit.

1 Libraries create a foundation for well-being.

Library spaces and resources provide the preconditions necessary for well-being to occur. NYPL patrons report that Library spaces, services, and materials provide them with a sense of **stability**, **safety, refuge**, and **peace**, and allow them to **escape** and **focus**.

92% of respondents reported feeling somewhat to very "calm/peaceful" after visiting the Library, resulting in an overall **76%** indexed calmness rating.

2 Libraries foster the core elements of well-being.

These preconditions activate the elements of positive psychology's PERMA framework of well-being—Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. NYPL patrons report that their Library usage:

- Generates the positive emotions of **comfort** and **joy**
- Promotes their engagement with the world, through **discovery**, **inspiration**, and **enrichment**
- Fosters relatedness, by providing **connection**, **care**, and **support**
- Helps them find meaning, via **knowledge**, **reflection**, and **purpose**
- Facilitates their accomplishments by supporting their **productivity**

74% of respondents reported that their Library use positively affects how equipped they feel to cope with the world.

90% of respondents reported that their Library use positively affects how much they love to learn new things.

3 Libraries promote personal development beyond well-being.

These preconditions and components of well-being combine to produce the fruits of flourishing: NYPL patrons report that their Library usage supports their **growth** and **expansion**.

88% of respondents reported that their Library use has supported their personal growth.

Continued

Further analysis demonstrates impact based on socioeconomic status and patterns of library use. While this report directly draws upon the experiences of NYPL patrons, it presents a theoretical model of how and in which ways libraries impact well-being—which is likely relevant to libraries across the nation.

4 The positive impact of libraries on well-being is highest for patrons living in lower income communities.

While surveyed patrons across all demographic segments self-reported Library impact on their well-being, the degree of impact was inversely related to neighborhood income levels.

73% of respondents living in lower-income ZIPs reported that their Library use positively affects their "feeling that there are people in their lives who really care about them," versus **48%** in higher-income ZIPs.

5 This positive contribution to well-being is also higher for patrons with more physical and time-intensive library usage.

While surveyed patrons across all usage types self-reported NYPL's positive impact on their well-being, patrons who spent time in the Library's spaces and attended programs reported consistently higher impact than e-only users.

82% of space users and **79%** of program attendees report that their use of the Library positively affects how optimistic they are about the future, versus **58%** of e-only users.

6 These findings demonstrate that public libraries support the flourishing of their patrons—and thereby help strengthen their communities.

This evidence argues for public libraries, including NYPL, to be on the map, and at the table, for community discussions about individual and collective well-being.

Overall, **80%** of respondents reported that their Library use had a big positive impact on at least one element of their well-being.

20 Factors of Patron Well-Being Experienced Across 3 Stages

1 Libraries Create a Foundation for Well-Being

- Stability
- Safety
- Refuge
- Escape
- Peace
- Focus

2 Libraries Foster the Core Elements of Well-Being

POSITIVE EMOTION	ENGAGEMENT	RELATIONSHIPS	MEANING	ACCOMPLISHMENT
Comfort	Discovery	Connection	Knowledge	Productivity
Joy	Inspiration	Care	Reflection	
	Enrichment	Support	Purpose	

3 Libraries Promote Personal Development Beyond Well-Being

- Expansion
- Growth

Introduction

In our divided, unequal, and commercialized society, libraries stand out as among the last truly public institutions. Providing access without financial, social, or physical barriers, public libraries make a unique contribution to promoting individual and collective flourishing throughout the communities they serve. Until recently, empirical work measuring the impact of public libraries on well-being has been sparse; this new partnership between The New York Public Library and the University of Pennsylvania marks the beginning of a thread of work investigating psychological well-being within the context of public libraries.

This paper sets out to establish a relationship between public libraries and the well-being of library patrons. By aligning with positive psychology and positive humanities research delineating the relationship between public cultural institutions and flourishing—and drawing connections to parallel concepts from prior research on the impact of public libraries on community building, social and cultural capital, and civic engagement—we construct an empirically testable relationship between library use and individual well-being, with important implications for collective flourishing.

In November and December 2023, The New York Public Library designed and fielded a comprehensive, system-wide survey of its patrons. One of the survey's goals was to test the hypothesis that the Library has a positive impact on its patrons' well-being. To meet this goal, we adapted well-being measures developed, validated, and used by researchers in the field of positive psychology for our survey. The survey included quantitative indicators assessing patrons' perceptions of the Library's impact on their well-being, along with open-ended questions asking patrons to qualitatively describe the Library's role in, and contribution to, their lives. We supplemented our survey with targeted focus groups to explore these questions in synchronous, in-depth discussions.

In this report, we combine our quantitative and qualitative analyses of this survey and its supplementary focus groups into an articulation of NYPL's positive contributions to its patrons' well-being. Specifically, we delineate three main stages through which the Library supports the flourishing of its patrons:

- First, Library spaces and resources provide the **preconditions necessary** for flourishing to occur.
- Second, these preconditions activate the elements of positive psychology's **PERMA framework** of well-being.
- Third, these preconditions and components of well-being combine to produce the fruits of flourishing: **growth and expansion**.

This paper begins by presenting a theoretical framework for flourishing, drawing upon Dr. Martin Seligman's seminal work in positive psychology alongside Dr. James Pawelski and Dr. Katherine Cotter's contributions to the field of the positive humanities. It then presents the methodology for, and findings of, the NYPL patron survey, proceeding through the three pathways through which the Library positively impacts the flourishing of its patrons.

Theoretical Framework

We understand flourishing as a broad term that involves both well-being and ill-being. Psychologically, well-being involves the cultivation and preservation of positive conditions (e.g., belonging, purpose in life), experiences (e.g., achieving mastery), and states (e.g., positive emotions). Conversely, ill-being involves the presence of negative conditions (e.g., loneliness, lack of meaning), experiences (e.g., trauma), and states (e.g., anxiety, depression). Flourishing occurs when an individual experiences relatively high levels of well-being and relatively low levels of ill-being (Cotter & Pawelski, 2022).

Of course, well-being and ill-being do not exist in isolation from one another. Individuals with high well-being are less likely to have high ill-being, and vice

versa. With that said, however, this likelihood is less strong than might be expected, and the connection between them is actually rather weak (Keyes, 2002, 2007). So it is not impossible for an individual to experience both high well-being and high ill-being. For that reason, we cannot simply take these two components to be the opposites of each other; instead, we need to study each component on its own to assess overall levels of flourishing. Further, it can be helpful to consider a comprehensive profile to identify positive factors that promote and preserve well-being or mitigate and prevent ill-being, and negative factors that aggravate and entrench ill-being or destroy and obstruct well-being (Pawelski, 2016). Although mainstream psychology has focused largely on the mitigation of ill-being, the examination of well-being has become more common in recent years thanks largely to the field of positive psychology, and understanding well-being in and of itself is now recognized as an important endeavor.

Here we focus on psychological well-being through the perspective of positive psychology. Although recent years have seen the examination of a range of well-being outcomes within the field of positive psychology, a dominant theoretical model remains the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011) that delineates five core components making up well-being:

- The experience of **positive emotions**, such as happiness and contentment (Fredrickson, 2001)
- Feelings of **engagement** in one's life and broader society (Seligman, 2011)
- The cultivation of positive **relationships** and feelings of belonging (Forgeard et al., 2011; Reis & Gable, 2003)
- Finding **meaning** in oneself and one's life (King & Napa, 1998)
- The experience of **accomplishment** and capability (Sen, 1993).

Other work within positive psychology and related fields has identified additional salient well-being factors, including having interesting and perspective-changing experiences (Oishi & Westgate, 2022), experiencing autonomy and agency (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 1998), using one's signature strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), developing one's character (Kristjánsson, 2015), and having transcendent experiences, such as experiences of awe (Keltner, 2023).

Much of positive psychology research has focused on individual experiences of well-being (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction) or on individual traits (e.g., character strengths, virtue), but a third pillar focuses on positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Fields such as positive organizational scholarship (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012) and systems informed positive psychology (Kern et al., 2020) go beyond a focus on the individual. Within this third pillar, investment in civic institutions meant for use by the public has been positioned as a necessary foundation for increasing well-being throughout society (Adler & Seligman, 2016; Dalmer et al., 2022; Klinenberg, 2018).

Aligned with positive psychology is the new field of the positive humanities. The positive humanities are an interdisciplinary field of academic scholarship, scientific research, and creative practice concerned with the relationship between culture and flourishing (Pawelski, 2022). This field integrates the scientific study of well-being with approaches and perspectives used within the arts and humanities for a more comprehensive approach to flourishing. Both scientific (e.g., Shim et al., 2019, 2021) and humanistic (e.g., Proctor, 1998; Small, 2014; Felski, 2020) scholarship has documented the flourishing benefits of engaging with the arts and humanities. A growing body of research has examined the flourishing benefits of a variety of arts and humanities activities, and an area of research particularly relevant for libraries has focused on museums.

Museums, and especially art museums, have been the sites of the first wave of empirical work asking whether experiences in public institutions can have an impact on flourishing, what forms this impact may take, and the mechanisms underlying the impact (see Cotter & Pawelski, 2022 for review). Research has found that art museum visitation and engagement is associated with beneficial outcomes connected to the PERMA model (e.g., increased positive emotion, Camic et al., 2016; Thomson et al., 2018; enhanced connections and relationships, Herron & Jamieson, 2020; Roberts et al., 2011). But research has also shown benefits to areas of flourishing outside the PERMA framework, including improved mental health (D'Cunha et al., 2019; Fancourt

& Steptoe, 2018), reduced stress levels (Clow & Fredhoi, 2006; Grossi et al., 2019), enhanced senses of subjective health and well-being (D'Cunha et al., 2019; Grossi et al., 2019; Schall et al., 2018), and reflection on one's place in the broader community and society (Smith, 2014; Waszkielewicz, 2006).

Further, art museums have undertaken a variety of initiatives and programs aimed toward supporting the flourishing of their audiences. Many of these programs have focused specifically on the needs of older adults and those with age-related medical conditions (e.g., dementia). Through these efforts, program participants have felt less isolated (Flatt et al., 2015; Roe et al., 2016; Rosenberg et al., 2009) and depressed (D'Cunha et al., 2019) and experienced greater emotional well-being (Camic et al., 2016; Rosenberg et al., 2009) and quality of life (D'Cunha et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2018). This work suggests that, beyond the benefits of typical engagement, these institutions can intentionally increase the flourishing of their audiences through program conceptualization and implementation. Although both art museums and libraries are public institutions, less research of this kind has been conducted in the field of public libraries, even though they are often mentioned alongside museums as key public institutions in supporting flourishing (e.g., Pawelski, 2022).

Libraries differ from museums in ways that may suggest distinct, or additional, pathways to cultivating well-being in patrons. American public libraries have historically committed themselves to supporting the self-actualization of their community members through the provision of shared resources and opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge (Gangewere, 2011). Like art museums, public libraries offer engagement with cultural materials (such as books and multimedia offerings, cultural programs, and exhibits) and are spaces in which the community congregates. However, libraries are also free and welcoming third spaces for people of all social backgrounds to work, read, or relax. Public libraries offer programs and classes for all ages; provide opportunities for both direct and indirect civic engagement; and provide shared resources for public consumption in a non-commercialized context. Individuals are likely to visit public libraries on a more regular basis than art museums, integrate library visitation and resources into the pursuit of their life goals in multiple domains, and extend their library relationship beyond the library's walls by bringing its materials home with them, and engaging with them there.

Given these dynamics, the scale and nature of libraries' contributions to their patrons' well-being are likely to differ from those of art museums. In the research discussed in this paper, we apply this argument to The New York Public Library specifically, assessing the degree and qualities of the Library's impact on well-being, as reported by responding patrons.

Data and Methods

In November and December 2023, The New York Public Library fielded a survey asking patrons about their: Library attitudes, behavior, and awareness; perception of Library impact on their well-being, and demographics. Survey distribution took two formats: an online survey accessible via the website and disseminated in Library newsletters, and a paper format, distributed via intercept strategy at select libraries across the NYPL system. The survey was available in English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian, and Bengali. In total, there were 2,401 respondents to the survey, 1,765 to the online format and 636 to the paper version. Only respondents who did not answer at least one of the independent and dependent variables were excluded from this analysis, resulting in an analytic sample of 1,974 respondents.

This report is a descriptive and theoretical analysis of the Library's positive contribution to its patrons' flourishing. Its theoretical and mechanistic arguments arise from a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative analysis of patron responses. The quantitative element derives from our analysis of responses to structured survey questions encompassing patrons' perceived impact on stages of well-being and their emotional experiences after visiting physical Library locations. The qualitative element centers on our analysis of the survey's open-ended, free-response question "How would your life be different without The New York Public Library?," combined with our analysis of supplementary focus groups exploring patrons' relationships with the Library in more depth. A more detailed discussion of the data and methods, including the descriptive characteristics of the analytic sample, can be found in the data and methods chapter at the end of this report.

1 Libraries Create a Foundation for Well-Being

Environmental Preconditions

The first stage to flourishing enabled by NYPL patrons' relationship with the Library involves qualities of Library spaces and resources that provide the necessary preconditions for well-being to occur. These preconditions, derived from our analysis of surveyed patrons' free-text responses, and covered in depth below, are: **stability**, **safety**, **refuge**, **escape**, **peace**, and **focus**.

Based on our survey findings, we argue that PERMA elements—for example, Engagement and Meaning—are more likely to be experienced within physical and psychological environments characterized by these preconditions. In their own words, patrons articulated that the Library is an environment unlike any other in the city: one uniquely equipped to activate elements of well-being and support the pursuit of their full potential, however they define that for themselves. It's easy to grasp the connections between:

- Positive emotions and an underlying sense of stability and safety, along with escape from negative experiences
- Engagement and a quiet, calm, and peaceful environment that allows for focus
- Relationships and a sense of refuge and home
- Meaning and stability
- Accomplishment and focus

Stability

When reflecting on the role the Library plays in their lives, respondents often rooted their statements in the idea that the Library's **stable**, enduring presence is something they can rely on. The reliability of the Library allowed the institution to become a large part of patrons' lives, both temporally—in terms of spending many hours a day there, over years of their lives—and emotionally. Patrons' ability to rely on the Library—to consider its presence as a non-negotiable, stable resource—allows them to navigate their city, and their lives, with assurance.

PATRON VOICES

"A touchstone for me"

"Just knowing it's there makes me feel better about my life in the city"

"A place to rely on"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Lost"

Safety

As a complement to the Library's institutional stability and reliability, respondents appreciated the **safety** of the Library. This safety was described as both objective, in that the Library spaces are themselves safe spaces, and subjective, in the feelings of safety and security they engender in patrons. In a city environment in which many people are always 'on' and scanning their environments, the Library's safety gives patrons the chance to fully relax and reduce vigilance.

PATRON VOICES

"A free space where we can...feel comfortable and safe"

"It feels safe here"

"The library provides a sense of security"

Refuge

As safe places reliably turned to in times of need, patrons describe how Library locations are seen as a **refuge**. Over time, respondents described how a reliably safe place to rest and recharge takes on the character of a **home**, providing the type of environment in which patrons can release and process their emotions, or simply feel as though they can fully exist as their true, authentic selves.

PATRON VOICES

"This is my safe haven"

"A home away from home"

"I get there and I feel like I am home"

"Space where I can just be me"

Escape

Respondents shared that the Library offered them a way to **escape** present circumstances, experiences, or emotions that may be associated with ill-being. This escape could be physical—escaping a difficult home life or the hectic nature of New York City by spending time in Library spaces—or emotional, using books or other media to transport them to other worlds. Using the Library in this way led to seeing the physical Library locations as a way to escape stress and anxiety.

PATRON VOICES

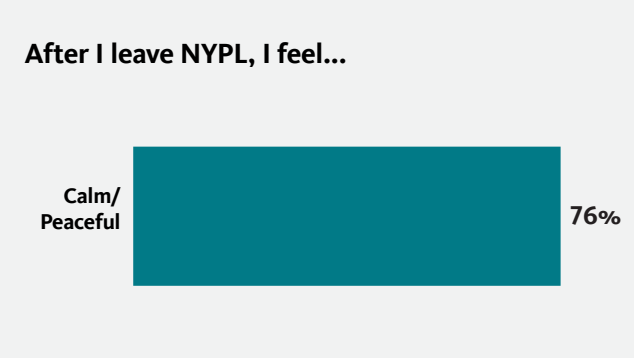
"Books transport me"

"Libraries are a good place...to escape to"

"Positive escape from day to day stress"

Peace

The survey included a structured question asking patrons about the extent to which they felt **calm** or **peaceful** after visiting the Library, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so). We operationalized this scale as a thermometer, whose maximum value of 100% would have been obtained if every single respondent said they felt very calm or peaceful after a Library visit. Patrons' responses resulted in an overall calm/peaceful score of 76%, out of a total possible 100%.



In their free text responses, patrons described Library locations as spaces that are **quiet**, calm, peaceful, serene, and tranquil. These qualities of space allow patrons to feel less stressed, and more at ease and in balance, than in other locations in which their life unfolds.

PATRON VOICES

"I depend on the library for quiet time"

"Islands of calm, and I find balance within them"

"A place to go...to quiet the mind"

"Private and peaceful atmosphere"

Focus

The aspects of the Library's built and social environment highlighted in this section—safety, reliability, peace, and intentional design of space to create distraction-free environments—facilitate patrons' **focus** and concentration. Patrons reported highly valuing time spent in Library spaces because they make it easier for them to enter into a clear, calm mental state that lends itself to focusing attention on tasks, goals, and personal pursuits. The ability to focus is highly linked to two dimensions of PERMA that will be discussed in this report's second chapter: Engagement and Accomplishment. Acting in combination, these qualities of Library spaces thus pave the way for experiences of PERMA.

PATRON VOICES

"Having the mental and physical space to study"

"Able to concentrate and focus on tasks"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Distracted"

CONTEXTUAL RESEARCH

An underexplored area in the research on public institutions and flourishing is understanding the environmental preconditions that allow patrons to experience well-being. Just as plants cannot flourish without a supportive environment, it is important to note the physical and social environments that are conducive to human flourishing (Lomas et al., 2024). What is it about public libraries and museums that allow them to serve as a nourishing soil in which visitors can plant themselves and flourish?

To begin answering this question, we can turn to scholarship that considers which environmental qualities and conditions are conducive to flourishing. We can consider as one component the material environments and requirements for flourishing to occur (Maslow, 1954; Rao & Min, 2018), such as sufficient shelter, safety, or nutrition. But we can expand this consideration, as Rao and Min (2018) suggest, to also include, amongst other resources, access to information sufficient to engage civically within society, to public spaces that are free and flexible in their engagement pathways, and to education to promote the acquisition of knowledge. From such a material environment perspective, public libraries provide vital resources that support flourishing.

If we also consider some of the core psychological needs connected with flourishing, such as the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000), we can examine the degree to which different environments are likely to meaningfully fulfill each of these needs. For instance, if we consider the need for autonomy within the public library environment, we can see how the varied resources, programs, and ways of engagement available could promote autonomous decisions regarding how to engage with these institutions. Competence can easily be linked with the missions of public libraries to provide a wealth of knowledge and resources to patrons through which they can feel better equipped to navigate life's challenges. Thus, we can consider both the material and intangible qualities of public library environments as necessary qualities in promoting flourishing in patrons.

Earlier work on the role of public libraries in society, and especially in their provision of public space, supports our argument that the combination of the built, social, and cultural environment of the public library creates the conditions under which flourishing can occur. Like public parks, public libraries are one of the few remaining third spaces in society where people can go to spend time without the expectation of spending money or defending their right to be present (Elmborg, 2011).

Prior research indicates that library environments can offer respite in a variety of social and built environments: in a dense urban environment, they may be places to decompress, while in a sparsely populated rural environment they may be places to feel part of a community and interact with others (Peterson, 2023; Sung, 2020; Svendsen, 2013). Across multiple life stages, the third space of the library serves special functions: for caregivers with small children to interact with other children, for teens and young adults to forge their identities, for working adults to further their careers, and for older adults with physical disabilities or fewer social connections to spend time in a social context (Cahill et al., 2020; Ziegler & Schwanen, 2011).

Lastly, the library extends beyond its own architecture by allowing its patrons to access, engage with, and bring into their homes, cultural materials and resources. Engagement with these resources creates opportunities for escape into different worlds and expansion into new modes of thought. In a broader sense, the institution of a public library can create feelings of trust in public institutions more generally, as users come to know they can rely on the library to fulfill their needs, increasing their belief that public assets truly exist for their benefit.

Prior research in anthropology, sociology, and library studies explains why third spaces such as those available in libraries are essential sites of respite in several social and cultural contexts and act as important spaces for individuals to exist.

Initially, it was like 'okay I need to go here to focus and get work done.' But now it plays the role of like, 'This place gives me some balance from the hectic schedule of work, just to have a peaceful space to recalibrate and let go...' It's a necessity now.

2 Libraries Foster the Core Elements of Well-Being

The second stage of flourishing enabled by NYPL patrons' relationship with the Library occurs when the Library's environmental preconditions activate the elements of positive psychology's PERMA framework of well-being—Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—and generate a range of beneficial factors. NYPL patrons report that their Library usage:

- Generates the positive emotions of **comfort** and **joy**
- Promotes their engagement with the world, through **discovery**, **inspiration**, and **enrichment**
- Fosters relatedness, by providing **connection**, **care**, and **support**
- Helps them find meaning, via **knowledge**, **reflection**, and **purpose**
- Facilitates their accomplishments by supporting their **productivity**

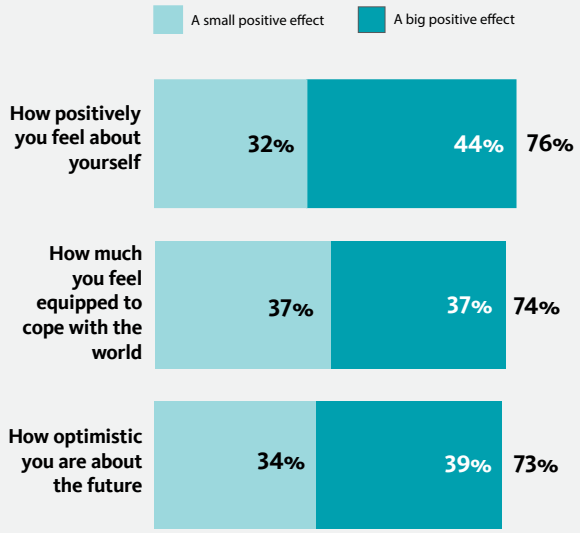
We begin this section by showing how respondents experience the five dimensions of PERMA through their Library relationship—both in their responses to structured survey questions asking respondents to reflect on how the Library makes them feel, has supported their specific goals in various areas of life, and has impacted stages of well-being, and in their own words from free-text responses and focus groups. We then delve into contextual research on the impact and value of libraries to explain exactly how NYPL, and libraries more broadly, may be having such an effect on our patrons.

Positive Emotion

The first pillar within the PERMA framework of well-being is the experience of Positive Emotion. Positive Emotion in itself is a broad concept, containing high-arousal states (e.g., happiness, joy), low-arousal states (e.g., contentment, serenity), and future-oriented positive feelings (e.g., optimism, hope). This category also includes the prevention and alleviation of negative emotional experiences to address ill-being alongside well-being.

Responses to our structured survey questions reflect NYPL's impact on patrons' experience of positive emotion in areas of self-esteem, ability to cope with stress, and optimism for the future. Over 70% of respondents felt that their use of the Library has had a big or small positive impact on measures of positive emotion adapted from positive psychology research: how positively they feel about themselves (76%), how much they feel equipped to cope with the world (74%), and how optimistic they are about the future (73%). More than a third of respondents perceived a big positive effect on all of these three items; the largest proportion (44%) for how positively they feel about themselves.

What sort of impact, if any, has your use of the Library and its resources had on...



Respondents' free-text comments reinforced the finding that patrons view the Library as a place where they feel positive emotions, including high-energy positive feelings such as joy and pleasure, and lower-energy, reflective feelings, such as comfort and optimism for the future. Respondents also view the Library as a place to alleviate the experience of negative feelings or develop resources to cope with negative feelings.

Comfort

One way that respondents framed the Library's impact on their emotions was as a source of **comfort** and **hope** in moments of uncertainty and stress. They described the Library as providing a sense of solace in difficult times or during destabilizing life transitions. They also noted that the Library helps them connect to a hopeful and empowered outlook on the future and their own agency in the world.

PATRON VOICES

"A balm for my mind and heart"

"It offers us hope that we can do something, that we can make a change, that we can advance"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Despairing"

"Stressed"

Joy

Respondents directly connected the Library to intensely positive emotions, such as **joy**, and its frequent companion, **pleasure**, and sustained **happiness**, which was so intrinsic to their Library experience that the place itself became imbued with positive feelings, literally becoming their "*happy place*." Respondents looked forward to visiting the Library: a place filled with resources to enjoy and be entertained by, and an environment in which they can reliably enhance their mood or shift towards a more positive outlook on life.

PATRON VOICES

"One of my big joys for the day...bringing these bright spots into my life"

"My happy place"

"Things to enjoy"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

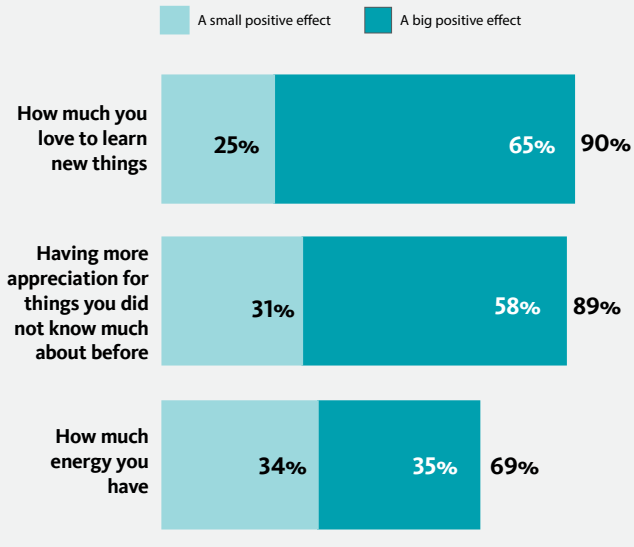
"Depressed"

Engagement

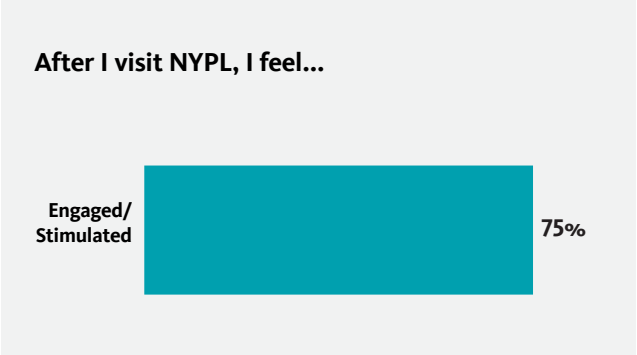
The second component of PERMA is Engagement. Engagement as a concept is similar to the idea of flow—a state in which one is fully occupied with the present moment, engaging with the task at hand.

Our structured questions measuring engagement focused on enjoyment of learning, satisfaction with gaining knowledge, and energy levels. Of all five dimensions of PERMA, the relationship between Library use and impact on engagement was the strongest. Ninety percent of respondents in the analytic sample felt that their use of the Library increased how much they love to learn new things, with 65% of the sample reporting the Library had a big positive effect and 24% a small positive effect. Only two percentage points lower, 88% of the analytic sample, reported the Library having a positive effect on appreciation for things they did not know much about before. Almost two-thirds of the analytic sample, 58%, felt their use of the Library had a big positive effect and 31% a small positive effect. Respondents were somewhat less likely to report the Library having a positive effect on how much energy they have, but still more than two-thirds of the respondents—69%—did feel the Library had an effect on this measure.

What sort of impact, if any, has your use of the Library and its resources had on...



We also asked respondents about the extent to which they felt engaged or stimulated after visiting the Library, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so). We operationalized this scale as a thermometer, whose maximum value of 100% would have been obtained if every single respondent said they felt very engaged after a Library visit. Patrons' responses resulted in an overall engagement score of 75%, out of a total possible 100%.



In their free-text responses, patrons described the Library as supporting their engagement through three pathways: facilitating the discovery and exploration of their interests, providing inspiration and motivation, and creating enrichment in their lives. These pathways involved creating a newfound or enhanced enjoyment of learning, providing a sense of abundance of cultural materials to discover, inspiration from the Library's built and social environment, and helping patrons grow into their identities as readers and learners.

Discovery

Respondents felt that the Library afforded them a way to explore ideas deeply and broadly, via engagement with the Library's abundant free materials. A secondary way in which this concept was articulated was through developing their **interests** using the materials, space, and staff of the Library.

Respondents appreciated the Library's lack of financial limits to exploration, enabling them to make more adventurous decisions to explore new authors, genres, or topics, and allowing intensive exploration of many materials on a single topic, because they did not have to pay to acquire these resources. Further, patrons described how the ability to browse shelves in-person or the collection online could lead to the **discovery** of a new genre or subject of book the patron would not have found otherwise.

Patrons also noted that the Library foregrounds and fosters their identities as readers, and encourages and nurtures their pursuit of their curiosity. Respondents highlighted the role of the Library in their discovery of new ideas and topics, leading to the feeling of excitement and interest that comes from being stimulated intellectually.

PATRON VOICES

"Nurture my curiosity"

"Intellectual stimulation"

"My ability to engage in life"

"Foster my love for books and reading"

"Read more broadly...freely...passionate, incautious, prolific [reading]"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Boring"

"Apathetic"

"More expensive"

Inspiration

Respondents reported feeling **inspired** by the Library's spaces and **motivated** by engaging in their pursuits alongside other patrons who were also working, reading, or learning alongside them, even if they did not know each other or even interact during their Library visit. Beyond inspiration to explore or create, respondents also shared that the Library provided a more diffuse sense of inspiration to engage more deeply in life or the task at hand.

PATRON VOICES

"Inspired to live a full, informed, healthy life"

"Surrounded me with life's possibilities"

"Feel motivated to do work alongside people who need to do the same"

"Beautiful atmosphere of learning and reading"

Enrichment

The final way respondents wrote about the Library's impact on engagement was through experiencing **enrichment** that adds color and vitality to their lives. In these responses, patrons highlighted the benefits they received from accessing the abundance of cultural resources provided freely by the Library. This enrichment was directly tied to a higher quality of life.

PATRON VOICES

"I deeply depend on the library for enrichment, and a higher quality of life"

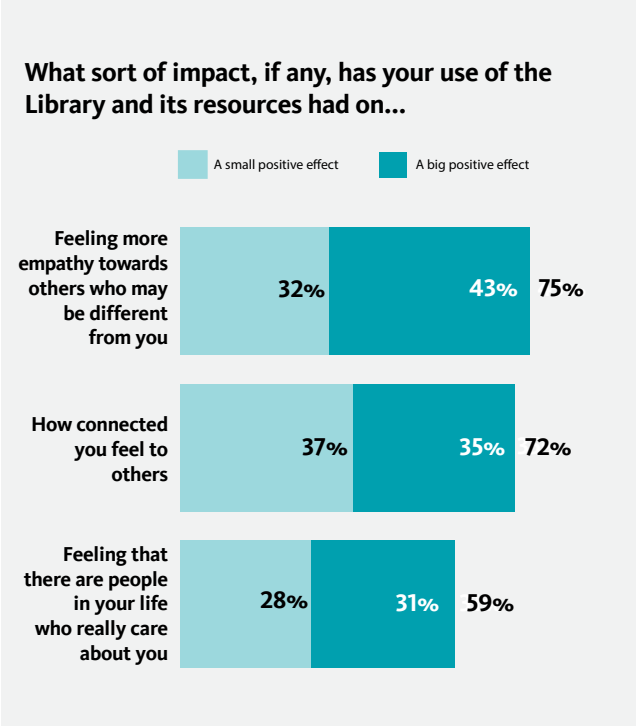
"Colorful"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Diminished"

"Starved"

"Empty"


What sort of impact, if any, has your use of the Library and its resources had on...
A small positive effect
A big positive effect
Feeling more empathy towards others who may be different from you
32%
43%
75%
How connected you feel to others
37%
35%
72%
Feeling that there are people in your life who really care about you
28%
31%
59%

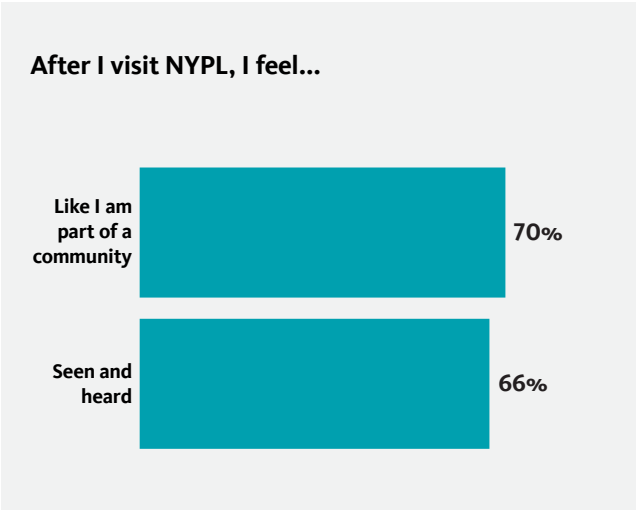
Relationships

PERMA's third pillar of well-being is Relationships, focusing on the importance of social connection, a sense of belonging, and support from others in times of need.

The survey's structured questions, adapted from measures validated by positive psychology, covered two strands within this domain. The first addressed relational benefits, asking patrons about feeling connected to and cared for by others. The second addressed the extension of relation to others by asking patrons about their empathy towards others who may be different from them.

Respondents were more likely to report the Library had an effect on the external-facing relational benefits, with 75% of respondents saying their use of the Library had a positive effect on feeling more empathy for others who may be different from them. The reception of relational benefits was slightly lower, with 72% of respondents reporting a positive effect on how connected they feel to others in their community. Fifty-nine percent of respondents reported that their Library use had a positive effect on feeling that there are people in their life who really care about them, which was the strongest statement pertaining to relational benefits. While this proportion is lower than the other two statements, still more than half of the analytic sample felt that their use of the Library had a small or big impact on feeling that others really care about them.

Two of our structured post-visit sentiment measures cover relational feelings arising from a Library visit: feeling like part of a community, and feeling seen and heard. Patrons reported experiencing both of these relational sentiments, with 70% of all possible points received for the former, and 66% for the latter.



> *...love the vibe and aura of this place...brings so much energy and positivity in my everyday life and keeps me motivated to do better in my personal and professional life.*

Respondents were also directly asked whether their use of Library resources supported them in their relationships. Forty-six percent of patrons in the analytic sample responded positively to this indicator. We see some of the most variation amongst respondent types for this measure, which we will explore in the Synthesis of Impact section.

Has the use of the Library's resources supported you in your...

In their free-text responses, patrons articulated the relationship and connection benefits received from The New York Public Library in three distinct ways: experiences of **connection**, receiving **care**, and finding **support** from Library staff.

Connection

Respondents described the Library as supporting their experience of a full spectrum of **connectedness**, and further, a sense of **community** that arises from the feelings of connection to others within a shared built environment. One end of that spectrum involves the connection and contact that arises from simply being in the presence of other community members—through existing alongside others in the same environment, participating in a program with others, or engaging with the same cultural object as others. The other end of this spectrum involves patrons deeply connecting to each other at the Library and, through the relationships they forge with each other, building enduring support systems for themselves.

Patrons acknowledged the Library's contribution to making them feel connected to their neighborhood, city, and world. They appreciated the Library's embodiment of welcome and inclusion, which creates an environment in which they can build their social skills by meeting and interacting with new people.

PATRON VOICES

"A place for such diverse neighbors to interact and form bonds"

"NYPL makes me feel connected to fellow New Yorkers and to my sense of home here"

"A real sense of community, bonding and belonging"

"Human contact"

"Created a support group"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Isolated"

"Distant"

"Cut off"

Care

A secondary relational benefit mentioned in patrons' free-text responses focused on the experience of relational emotions: the reception of **care** and **kindness** via the atmosphere of the Library, other patrons, and staff members. Some respondents articulated this as a sense of warmth and inclusion. Others spoke about an environment imbued with love and respect, and of feeling listened to by Library staff and other patrons.

PATRON VOICES

"We care about each other, and wish the best for our fellow citizens"

"Warm welcoming environment"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Colder"

"Exclusionary"

Support

A third relational benefit articulated by our respondents is the ability to rely on the help and assistance of Library staff, and to benefit from their knowledgeable guidance in navigating resources within the Library and beyond. Patrons shared that their lives would be more difficult without this **support**, which often came from receiving **help** from staff and other patrons. In a broader sense, NYPL was seen as a supportive institution patrons could rely on to feel equipped to pursue their goals and handle life's questions.

PATRON VOICES

"Help I trust"

"Myriad of ways that it can be there for me and provide support in my life"

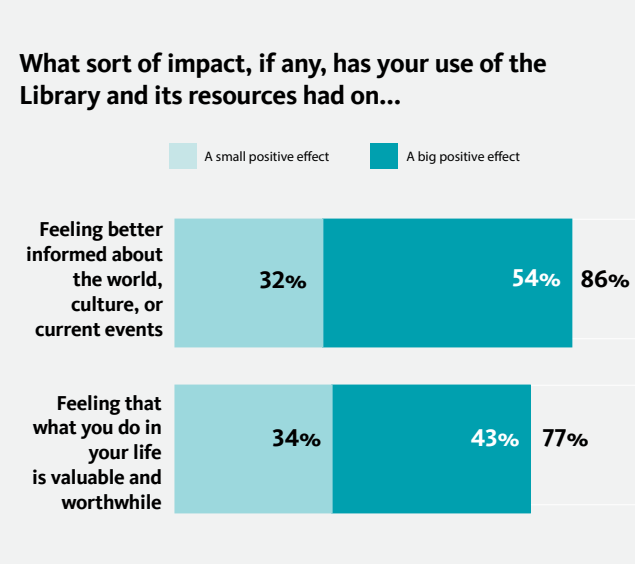
How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Difficult"

Meaning

The third dimension of PERMA is Meaning: feeling connected to a purpose for one's life, being part of—and informed about—something bigger than oneself, and having a sense that one is valuable and that one's actions are worthwhile.

The survey's structured questions addressed meaning by asking respondents whether their Library use supported their feeling informed about the world, and/or that their activities are valuable and worthwhile. Over three-quarters of the analytic sample felt their use of the Library had a positive effect on both, with 86% perceiving a positive effect on feeling better informed about the world, culture, or current events and 77% on feeling that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile. More than half of the analytic sample (54%) felt the Library has a big positive effect on feeling informed, and more than a third (43%) a big positive effect on feeling that what one does in one's life is valuable and worthwhile.


What sort of impact, if any, has your use of the Library and its resources had on...
A small positive effect
A big positive effect
Feeling better informed about the world, culture, or current events
32%
54%
86%
Feeling that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile
34%
43%
77%

In their free-text responses, patrons described the Library adding meaning to their lives through supporting their pursuit of information and knowledge, providing dedicated space and time to reflect and introspect on their lives, and nurturing their sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Knowledge

As would be expected, respondents noted that Library resources supported their literacy throughout their lives, and connected them to **information**, **knowledge**, and current affairs in their neighborhood, city, and beyond. Respondents reported that through their use of the resources available at NYPL, they were able to gain an understanding of the world and how it works, accumulating knowledge and insight such that they felt "*enlightened*" and "*awakened*." Access to knowledge regarding current affairs, history, and literature gave patrons a tangible route to answer their questions, feel informed, and learn about themselves. Respondents felt that without NYPL, they would be "*ignorant*" or "*naive*." The Library provides its patrons with an increased understanding of the world, and of their place within it.

PATRON VOICES

"Enrich my understanding of the world"

"Literate"

"Awareness"

"A place of awakening"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Ignorant"

"Naive"

Reflection

Respondents shared that the Library serves as a unique space to **introspect**—to **reflect** on where they are on their life's journey. In near-spiritual tones, patrons described the Library as a place where they could commune with themselves, process feelings or difficult times, and regroup and plan for their future. Respondents felt that the Library was a reliable "*place to collect one's thoughts*" that was especially helpful during times of personal upheaval or changes in life stage.

PATRON VOICES

"Place to collect one's thoughts"

"A stress free environment to plan the next step of your life, especially in transition periods"

Purpose

Respondents also shared that their relationship with the Library helps foster their sense of **purpose** and **fulfillment**, both as individual selves and as citizens within their communities. Patrons described how their Library relationship supports their sense of being useful, valuable, contributing members of society.

PATRON VOICES

"Visiting the library gives me a goal every week"

"Makes me feel useful"

"The library gives you a sense of direction"

"Fruitful both in an empirical utilitarian way as well as in non-tangible ways such as mental and emotional"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Vacuum"

"I probably would get into more mischief"

Accomplishment

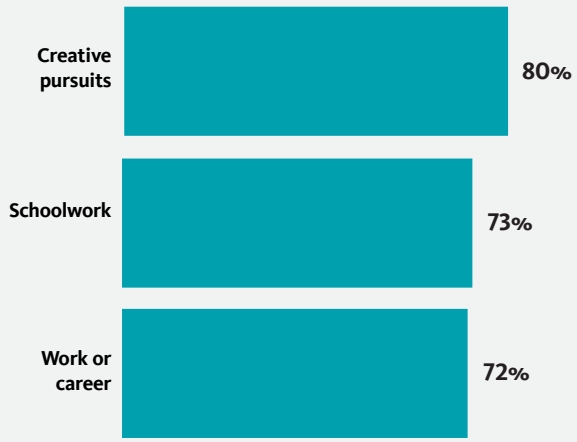
The final pillar of well-being within the PERMA framework is Accomplishment: the fulfillment of one's goals, and the feeling of mastery from doing something and doing it well.

The Library contributes to its patrons' sense of accomplishment by supporting their productivity and the pursuit of their goals in multiple domains of their lives. In structured questions, the vast majority of respondents reported feeling a sense of accomplishment after a Library visit, with 74% of a possible 100 points garnered on the post-visit sentiment scale. Most also reported feeling on top of everything they need to do, with 70% of all possible points reported by respondents.

After I visit NYPL, I feel...

More than 70% of respondents in the analytic sample felt that the Library has helped them achieve their goals in several areas: creative pursuits (80%), school (73%), and work or career (72%). Interestingly, the highest share of respondents reported gains in creative goals, even more so than school and career, suggesting that respondents value the use of the Library for accomplishing non-employment related goals and getting a sense of accomplishment through working on personal projects or learning new creative skills.

Has the use of the Library's resources supported you in your...



Productivity

NYPL patrons span the socio-demographic spectrum of New Yorkers—and, as such, have a diverse set of goals and aspirations. But they are united in turning to the Library to pursue goals and be productive across various life domains: professional, relational, creative, and educational. Coming to the Library put respondents in a mental state of activity, which helped them accomplish everything from making progress on long-term goals to doing daily tasks. Without the Library, respondents felt they would be behind in their desired pursuits.

PATRON VOICES

"Being here allows me to do what I need to do"

"Help my kids excel in school"

"Work on personal projects"

"Conduct business"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Further behind"

Discussion of PERMA Results

Respondents to this survey reported that The New York Public Library supports their well-being along all five dimensions of the PERMA model. The most consistently reported dimension of perceived impact was Engagement, especially in the sense of loving to learn new things, and the least was Relationships. However, across the vast majority of structured items, over half of respondents reported experiencing a positive effect of some sort, whether on their internal states or their external accomplishments.

These findings lead us to consider how—via which specific mechanisms—NYPL, and public libraries more broadly, positively impact their patrons' well-being.

While our analysis of this survey cannot disentangle the exact pathways through which our patrons experience these effects, we can draw on academic research that, when put in conversation with our findings, fills in mechanistic gaps. These connections can, in turn, point to questions that could be studied in future causal research.

The following review of interdisciplinary research covering public library impact on individuals and communities spans the fields of sociology, library studies, information science, and psychology. It provides essential contextual information about the potential mechanisms by which well-being is supported within the library and through its resources.

CONTEXTUAL RESEARCH

Public libraries serve multiple roles within their communities: third space, educational and learning center, doorway to culture and information. They provide their patrons with opportunities to form connections with others, build trust in individuals and institutions, decrease feelings of loneliness, meaningfully engage with cultural materials, and participate in civic life.

As "third spaces," public libraries allow their patrons to experience a potent combination of shared purpose, engagement, and belonging. They cultivate a simultaneously specific and variegated atmosphere for visitors: a quiet space for working, reading, and self-reflection that also promotes engagement, interest, motivation, and social connection (Peterson, 2023). People who may otherwise rarely come into contact exist alongside each other for extended periods of time, participate in the same parallel activities or hobbies, or share the same cultural object, creating feelings of relation and similarity that may otherwise not exist (De Backer, 2021; Robinson, 2020).

In their provision of shared public space and programming for all ages, public libraries foster and maintain social connections that counter isolation and disseminate social capital. At a time when Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the Surgeon General of the United States, has declared an epidemic of loneliness, these opportunities for connection are essential *(Office of the Surgeon General, 2023*). The opportunities for social connection offered by public libraries also facilitate the creation of social capital—a social scientific term for the material and affective benefits that can be accrued from social ties—for example, information about job openings, aid in times of emergency, or opportunities to expand one's perspective (Granovetter, 1973; Oliphant, 2014; Scott, 2011; Sørensen, 2021).

Social capital takes two forms: bonding social capital, or social relationships between individuals who are similar in social background and interests, and bridging social capital, or connections between individuals who are different socio-economically or who do not have similar interests. Libraries foster the development of both bonding and bridging social capital, largely in their provision of public spaces and programs, which bring people together (Johnson, 2012; Svendsen, 2013; Vårheim, 2014; Vårheim et al., 2008).

Within the context of library programs, patrons can forge temporary or more enduring relationships with each other, and/or come to view library staff as a social resource for help, knowledge, or advice. These kinds of relationships, and trust in one's community, have been linked to integration into one's community for immigrants, career advancement or opportunities, and increased subjective well-being (Johnson, 2012; Svendsen, 2013; Vårheim, 2014; Vårheim et al., 2008).

Social capital also links to the development of generalized trust, or how much an individual generally trusts others in one's community (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008); increased levels of trust in general others is associated with greater levels of cooperation and prosocial behavior. Existing together in the public space of the library may also engender generalized trust through

exposure to a diverse representation of community members and experiencing the feelings of togetherness and community.

Social capital can be seen as a precursor for the development of a sense of belonging to a larger community, which is one element of relatedness. Prior research on well-being has found that individuals with higher levels of social capital and generalized trust tend to have increased levels of subjective well-being and decreased feelings of loneliness (Abbott & Freeth, 2008; Helliwell et al., 2017). Research conducted in the library context has illustrated the benefits that immigrant program attendees receive from the social connections they make at the library (Vårheim, 2014), and that individuals experiencing homelessness receive from a space where they can exist safely and peacefully (Hodgetts et al., 2008).

A parallel concept to social capital is cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), which takes three forms: objective cultural capital (cultural objects that hold cultural currency by being valued by economic or social elites), embodied social capital (the skills, dispositions, and tastes needed to navigate social institutions as if one naturally belongs in them), and institutional capital (credentials, identities, and roles that provide authority and respect). Cultural capital can confer significant benefits in terms of socioeconomic status. For example, hiring processes often advantage candidates who are culturally similar in experiences, leisure interests, and institutional credentials to the hirers (Rivera, 2012). Similarly, children and teens from higher class backgrounds are more comfortable navigating complex bureaucratic institutions to get their needs met, leading to better educational and occupational outcomes (Lareau, 2015).

Public libraries offer access to all three forms of cultural capital (Goulding, 2008). Most directly, they provide objectified cultural capital through the ability to borrow books and media, and offer access to archival materials including artwork, diaries, and key historical documents. They provide embodied cultural capital through their social environment, which creates opportunities for individuals to learn how to act in a social space and integrate the cultural norms into their way of existing. Embodied cultural capital is also taught to library patrons via programs, especially in language classes for new immigrants or programs that help navigate institutions, unmasking the hidden or unspoken cultural expectations behind their rules and norms. Finally, public libraries have been shown to facilitate the acquisition of institutional cultural capital through, for example, resources on college applications and career development (Summers & Buchanan, 2018; Wojciechowska & Topolska, 2021).

Cultural capital connects to flourishing through the pathways of engagement, meaning-making, and accomplishment. Engaging with the objectified cultural capital offered by public libraries can influence patrons to reconsider their place in society, what gives their lives meaning, and what they want to do with their lives. The positive humanities in particular have outlined this relationship between engagement with human culture and flourishing (Pawelski, 2022; Cotter & Pawelski, 2022). Public libraries also provide embodied and institutional cultural capital that directly facilitate their patrons' accomplishment—for example, resources to attain educational credentials, employment opportunities, and cultural integration.

Finally, libraries offer opportunities for civic engagement and civic participation. Public library usage activates patrons' civic identities by creating a context of shared resources—public goods, or civic assets—in a noncommercial environment available for the whole community. The collective ownership of library resources and spaces engenders shared responsibility and a civic-minded outlook, which may also increase generalized trust. Public libraries are also among the few public institutions that children can meaningfully be a part of even before attending school. They also provide opportunities for individuals to directly participate in civic activities, by attending community and volunteer events, registering as voters, or obtaining information about upcoming elections. Civic engagement can positively impact well-being through increasing a sense of meaning, self-efficacy in the realm of political impact, and personal responsibility (Fenn et al., 2021; Wray-Lake et al., 2019). Some research has shown that civic participation can have stronger effects on well-being for those who are marginalized in society by cultivating hope and meaning in their lives (Birger Sagiv et al., 2022).

Libraries promote the cultivation of social, cultural, and human capital, engender feelings of belonging and community, and create opportunities for civic engagement. These are in themselves not fully separable, as they all affect each other directly and indirectly. For example, when individuals feel a strong sense of belonging to a community, they are more likely to have higher levels of social capital, and vice versa. Similarly, engaging more deeply in cultural objects may evoke reflection on one's place in society and increase civic engagement.

3 Libraries Promote Personal Development Beyond Well-Being

The third and final stage of flourishing enabled by NYPL patrons' relationship with the Library goes a step beyond the PERMA model of well-being. It involves the Library's support of patrons' individual growth and the expansion of themselves and their worlds. In essence, respondents find that their use of the Library and its resources leads to a lasting change in themselves and the way they view the world.

In the prior section, we show how Library patrons experience the dimensions of PERMA through their use of the space, materials, and other resources available through the Library, and through their interactions with other patrons and Library staff. However, these experiences of PERMA typically manifest as a temporary shift in mental or emotional state, rather than a lasting change. For example, patrons described feelings of joy engendered from being within the physical space of the Library and engagement from becoming engrossed in a library book. These PERMA experiences are positive and important, but transient. Alongside these temporal experiences of well-being, we also found a qualitatively different type of outcome in the free-text responses from patrons, which described a more lasting change. In their own words, patrons expressed feeling that their Library use had a more consequential effect that went beyond PERMA: a transformation in themselves and how they experience the world around them through personal growth, learning, and expansion.

While the positive impact of public library use on externally validated components of well-being is an achievement in its own right, we argue that this final stage of flourishing is categorically different, due to its enduring and transformative nature. We conceptualize this outcome as possibly occurring as a result of repeated and accretive PERMA experiences from Library use, which act as catalysts for enduring growth and self-actualization, the pinnacle of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs.

This self-actualization and the fulfillment of one's potential, which patrons typically articulated in terms of growth and expansion, can be seen as the evidential flower and fruit of flourishing. In some of the most heartwarming responses to the survey's free-response question, respondents described the Library as an essential component of transformation in their lives. The types of enduring change articulated by patrons tended to take two forms: the first, expansion of the self and their perception of the world around them and the second of growth, learning, and development as a person.

Expansion

In the first type of transformation, patrons articulated their use of the Library as creating a sense of personal and world **expansion**. Through their use of Library resources, patrons gained a deeper understanding of their place within the world, and the feeling that they could—and do—have an impact on their world and on those around them. Further, they could more easily see the interconnectedness of a globalized world and the breadth of existing perspectives on societal issues and life itself. Patrons articulating this effect described it as a nurturing of open-mindedness and empathy, which opened doors to the outside world, and let them connect to and explore it on their own terms.

PATRON VOICES

"Helps me expand my boundaries in all kinds of ways"

"NYPL helps me see the world through other people's eyes...in more depth, and broader perspectives"

"Aware of the largeness of the world around me"

"Opened doors"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"Smaller"

"Narrower"

Growth

The second type of "beyond PERMA" outcome which patrons expressed in the free response question was a feeling of personal **growth** and **learning** contributing to the achievement of their full potential.

While experiences of PERMA inside the Library or through its resources could involve learning new skills (Accomplishment) or gaining knowledge and information (Engagement), this second type of personal growth is broader, pointing to a meaningful realization of goals and an authentic self, spanning across all dimensions of life: personal, social, and professional.

Patrons shared that without access to the Library and its supportive resources, they would still be 'stuck' in an old version of themselves, unable to evolve. In other words, patrons tied their Library use to growing into larger, more fully-realized, or more well-rounded versions of themselves.

PATRON VOICES

"Essential to my learning and development as a human being"

"Professional development, personal and spiritual growth"

How patrons would feel without the Library:

"My potential would be reached halfway"

The survey also included a structured question focusing on the Library's impact on patrons' personal growth. Eighty-eight percent of respondents in the analytic sample said that their use of the Library and its resources had supported them in their personal growth. Across the set of questions assessing goal achievement, personal growth was the type of growth respondents were most likely to say the Library's resources had impacted, more than creative, career, work, or school-related outcomes.

Has the use of the Library's resources supported you in your...

CONTEXTUAL RESEARCH

Prior literature helps contextualize how temporal experiences of well-being elements can lead to more permanent individual growth. For example, experiencing autonomy and competence, two basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000) related to PERMA, have been associated with greater creative performance and global life satisfaction (Van den Broeck et al., 2016) and are further theorized to be vital to resilience and growth (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991) argued that flow experiences render the organization of the self experiencing it more complex and lead to growth. Further, several of the flourishing components identified in this survey—meaning, hope, and optimism—have been more generally associated with personal growth (Yu et al., 2023).

There has been very little academic research on experiences of personal growth as an outcome of library use. While some studies, mentioned earlier in this paper, have shown lasting benefits in trust, connectedness, and social and cultural capital arising from library use, almost none have focused on personal transformation or change in one's worldview. This is an area in which future research could have a particularly impactful role.

Synthesis of Impact

Up to this point, we have illustrated that NYPL patrons associate their use of the Library and its resources with positive well-being impacts along all five dimensions of the PERMA framework, as well as with stages of flourishing that precede and follow from it. These effects have been shown across all types of Library patrons responding to the survey.

NYPL's user base reflects the underlying diversity of the area it serves. Everyone who comes to the Library arrives with their own unique set of life circumstances and desired goals; thus, it is likely that there are differences in the Library's impact on well-being, depending on patrons' demographic characteristics and patterns of Library use.

In this section, we explore how the degree of the Library's positive impact on patrons' self-reported well-being may depend on patrons' socioeconomic status, as well as patterns of Library usage. We hypothesize that individuals who are economically disadvantaged may report stronger Library impacts on their well-being because they may not have access to other, non-Library sources to support their flourishing. We also hypothesize that patrons who use the Library in more physical and time-intensive ways may report a stronger well-being effect from the Library vs. patrons with more transactional and remote usage, because they experience a stronger treatment of all the Library has to offer.

In the following two sections we group our results, split by the independent variable, into the following three types of measures:

- **Perceived impact on well-being**: respondents' self-reported perception of the Library's impact on them, with the options "no effect," "a small positive effect," and "a big positive effect."

- **Post-visit sentiment**: the extent to which respondents experienced specific emotions following their most recent visit to an NYPL location.

- **Goal achievement**: whether respondents' see their use of the Library as supporting them in achieving their goals in specific life domains.

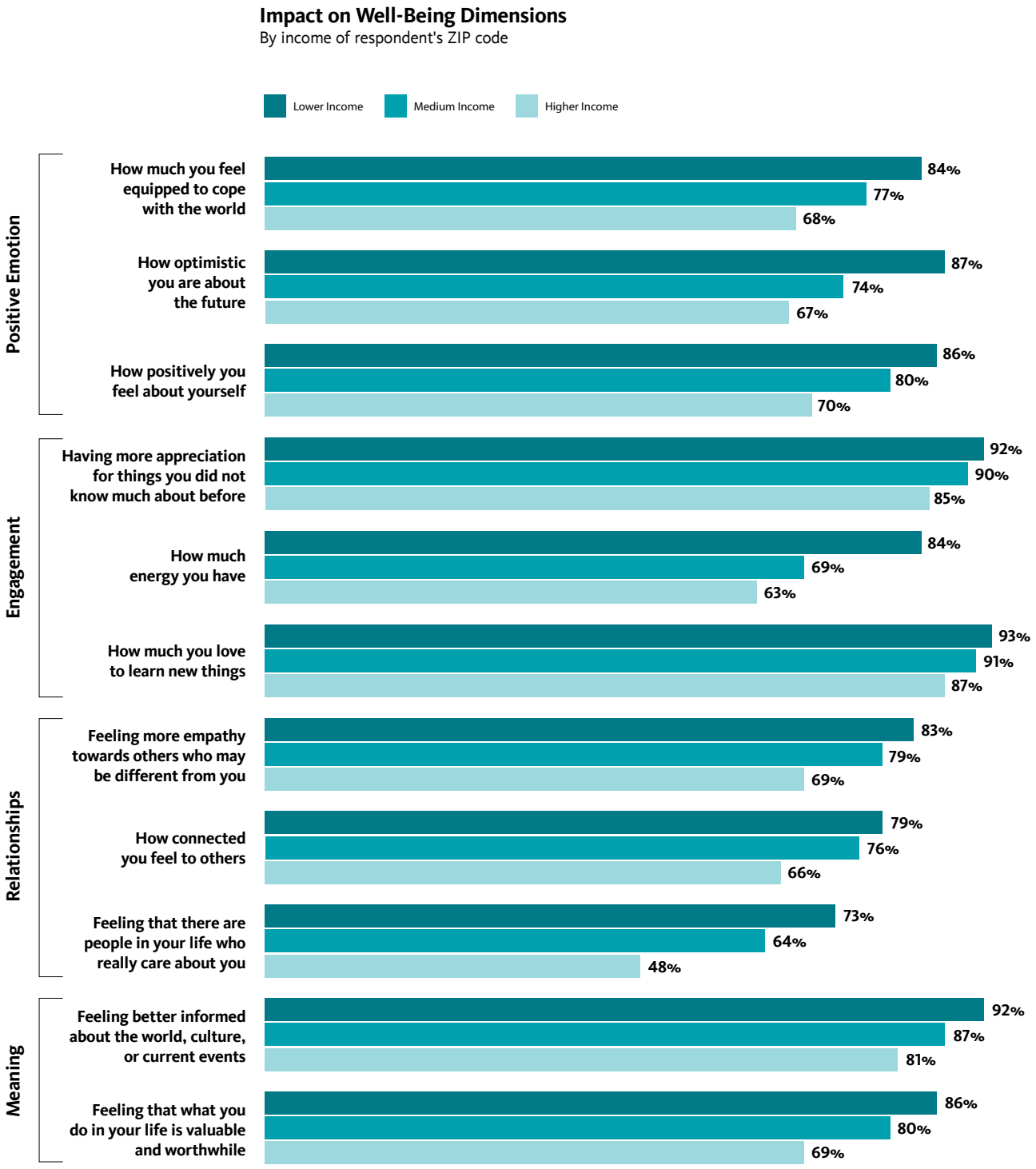
We use both a derived measure of income, coming from respondents' ZIP codes, as well as binary indicators of their usage types, to look for differences in well-being effects across different patron types.

Respondent Income

Perceived Impact on Well-Being

First, we examine the percentage of respondents in each income bracket who felt the Library had a positive effect on their perceived well-being. Across all measured items, respondents living in lower-income ZIP codes report the highest levels of positive Library impact, and respondents living in higher-income ZIP codes reported the lowest. These differences are especially pronounced in the items measuring the Relationship dimension of PERMA. For example, 73% of respondents in lower-income ZIP codes report that the Library positively impacts their feeling like *there are people who really care about them*, compared to 48% of respondents living in higher-income areas—a 25 percentage point difference. Similarly, 79% of respondents living in lower-income areas report that the Library positively impacts *how connected they feel to others*, vs. 66% of respondents living in higher-income areas—a 13 percentage point difference.

The Engagement dimension of PERMA contained two of the smallest differences by income: six and seven percentage points for the Library's positive impact on *how much I love to learn new things* and *having more appreciation for things you did not know about before*, respectively. This dimension also had the second largest difference for the Library's positive impact on *how much energy you have*, with 84% of respondents in lower-income ZIP codes reporting a positive impact, compared to 63% of respondents in higher-income ZIP codes—a 21 percentage point difference.

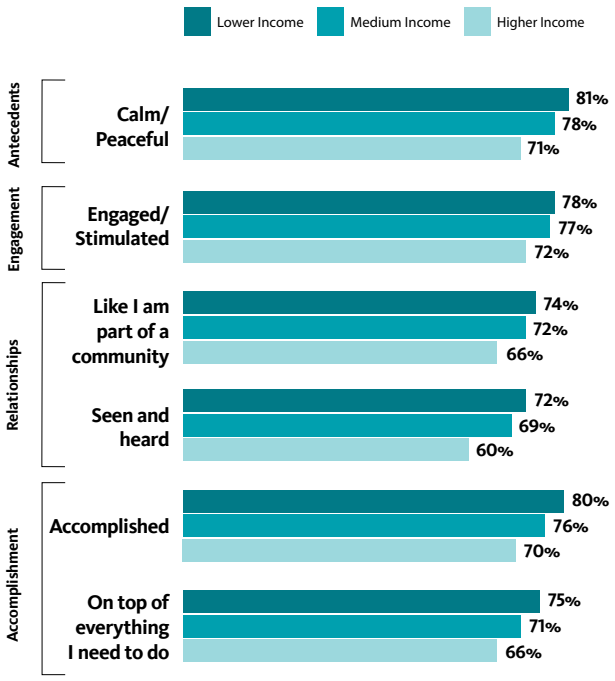


Note: The synthesis plots combine small positive effect and big positive effect into one positive effect percentage, to ease interpretation of the plots.

Post-Visit Sentiment

In our second measure of well-being, the affective impact of a Library visit, we see the same pattern, with respondents living in lower-income areas being most likely to report feeling *any* of these emotions, and those living in higher-income areas the least likely to do so. This was especially strong for feeling seen and heard, with a 12 percentage point difference between those in lower (72%) and higher (60%) income ZIP codes. The smallest difference between respondents living in lower or higher income ZIP codes came from the feeling of being engaged or stimulated, with only a six percentage point difference–78% versus 72%, respectively.

Impact on Post-Visit Sentiment
By income of respondent's ZIP code

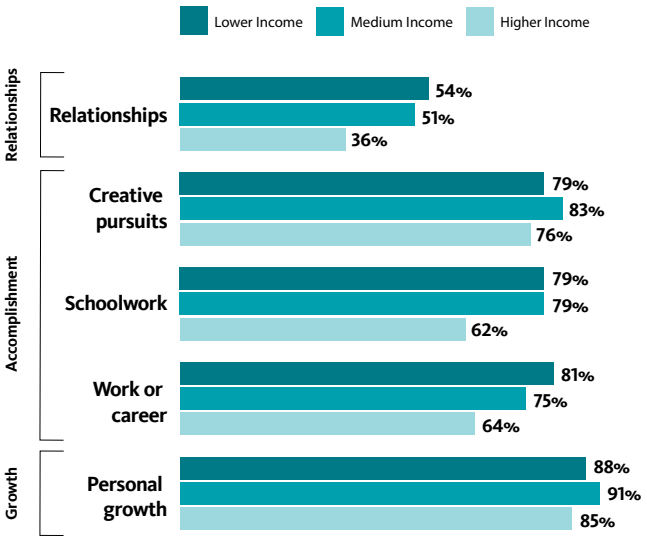


Goal Achievement

We see a largely similar pattern when it comes to the structured questions focusing on the Library's positive impact on respondents' pursuit of their goals, across different dimensions of life. Across all five goal categories, respondents in higher-income ZIP codes had the lowest proportion self-reporting that their use of the Library supported their goals. The biggest difference between respondents in higher- and lower-income ZIP codes comes again in the area of relationships, with 54% of respondents living in lower-income ZIP codes reporting Library support in that area, vs. 36% in higher-income ones—an 18 percentage point difference.

There were also large differences between respondents living in lower- and higher-income ZIP codes along the work and school dimensions, with about 80% of respondents in lower-income areas—62–64% of respondents in higher-income areas—reporting Library impact. Interestingly, those living in medium-income ZIP codes report the highest agreement with the Library supporting their creative pursuits (83%) and personal growth (91%), a variation from the dominant pattern of respondents living in lower-income ZIP codes reporting the greatest impact. However, the differences between respondents living in lower- and medium-income ZIP codes were not statistically significant. In fact, the differences between all three income groups do not exceed seven percentage points in either of these two dimensions, indicating that there is less of a differential effect along income lines in the Library's nurturing of its patrons' personal growth and creativity.

Impact on Goal Achievement
By income of respondent's ZIP code



Overall, we find that our respondents who live in ZIP codes with a median household income under $50,000

a year generally report the strongest well-being effects tied to their use of the Library and its resources. This differential is especially strong for relational benefits and the smallest for engagement, goal accomplishment associated with creativity, and the flourishing outcome of personal growth. This last finding is especially interesting, because it shows that respondents experience flourishing through their use of the Library regardless of their initial state of well-being.

Respondent Pattern of Library Use

In our second analysis of Library impact by respondent characteristics, we split our respondents into categories based on their usage characteristics. Our categories are:

- Materials users, who use library materials such as books, CDs, or DVDs in our branch libraries or special collections in our research libraries
- Holds users, a subset of materials users who place items on advance hold and then pick up them in person
- Computer and technology users who come to the Library to access desktop computers and Wi-Fi
- Space users who work, read, study, and relax in the public space provided by the Library
- Program attendees, who visit the Library to be part of a program or class
- E-only users, whose relationship with the Library is entirely digital, focusing on e-books, digital audiobooks, and databases accessible remotely

Respondents—other than those in our e-only category—can fall into multiple usage categories, reflecting the fact that patrons can simultaneously use the Library across two or more categories, such as space and computer usage or materials and program attendance.

Perceived Impact on Well-Being

The graph below collapses the scale of perceived impact on well-being by the dimension of PERMA the statements operationalize, to allow for easier interpretation of the results. To summarize the impact, we take the average percentage of users in each use type who report a small or big positive Library effect on the statements that fall into that PERMA dimension.

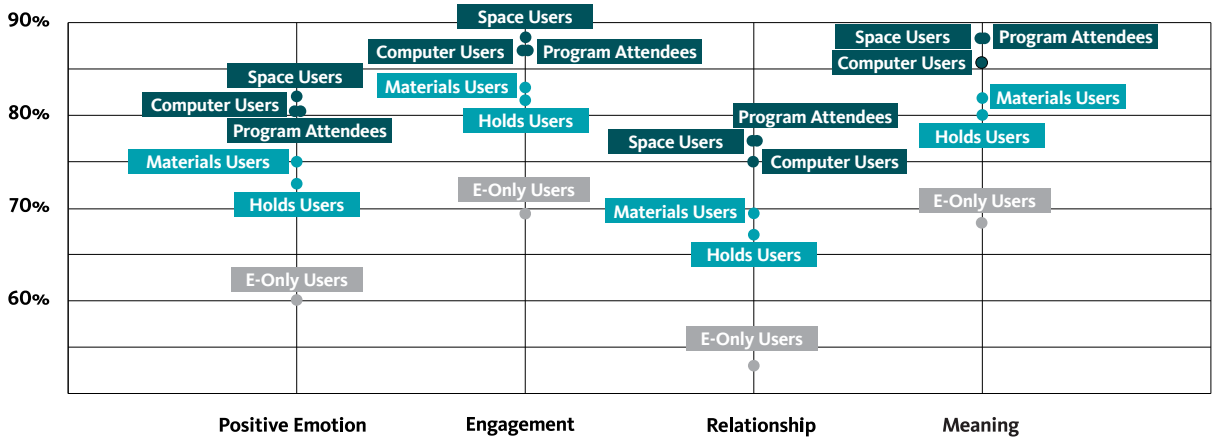
To provide an illustrative example, we can take the Positive Emotion dimension of PERMA and the subset of materials users. First, we calculate the percentage of materials users who report a small or big positive effect on the three statements capturing engagement:

- How positively you feel about yourself (77%)
- How optimistic you are about the future (73%)
- The extent to which you can cope with stress in the future (74%)

The average across these three items capturing Positive Emotion is 74.6%, which is the value plotted in the illustration below.

We see a consistent pattern across the elements of PERMA: the deeper and more time-intensive a

Impact on Perception of Well-Being Measures



No measures in the set of perceived impact on well-being scale corresponded to the concept of Accomplishment in PERMA, and thus it is not presented in this plot. Please refer to the data & methods chapter for more detail on which survey items corresponded to PERMA dimensions and stages of flourishing.

respondents' Library use, the larger their average self-reported impact. Respondents in the e-only category, who never physically visit Library locations, report the lowest impact on their well-being. Respondents who spend longer amounts of time inside Library spaces—our space users, computer users, and program attendees—report the highest levels of impact. Materials and holds users fall in between these two extremes, with slightly lower average perceived impact than program, computer, or space users, but considerably more than our e-only users.

Post-Visit Sentiment

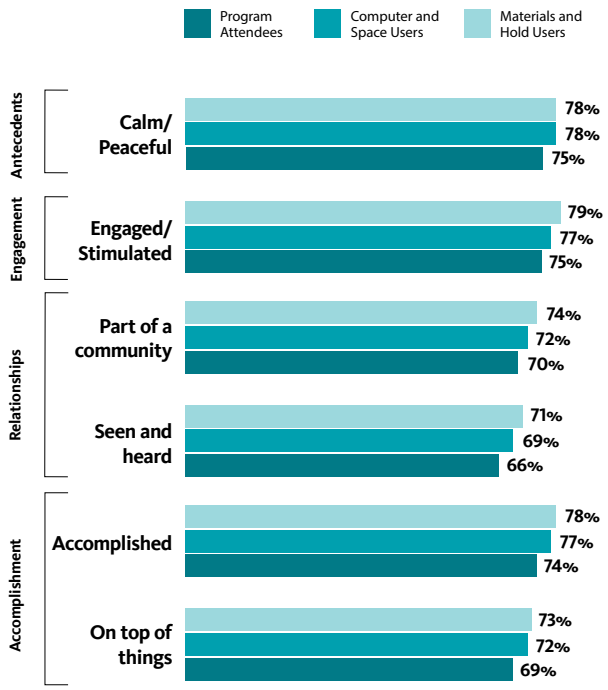
The post-visit sentiment analysis does not include our e-only users. Because e-only users do not visit physical Library locations, they did not answer any questions about how visiting the Library makes them feel. Additionally, for ease of plot interpretation, we group usage types into three categories: materials and holds users, program attendees, and computer and space users.

These results follow a similar, although not identical pattern, to those in the section above. Materials and holds users were least likely to report strongly feeling any of these sentiments. Program attendees were the most likely to report strongly feeling any of these sentiments, perhaps because they were most likely to have interacted with others in the course of their visit. However, the differences across all items were small, never exceeding a five percentage point difference.

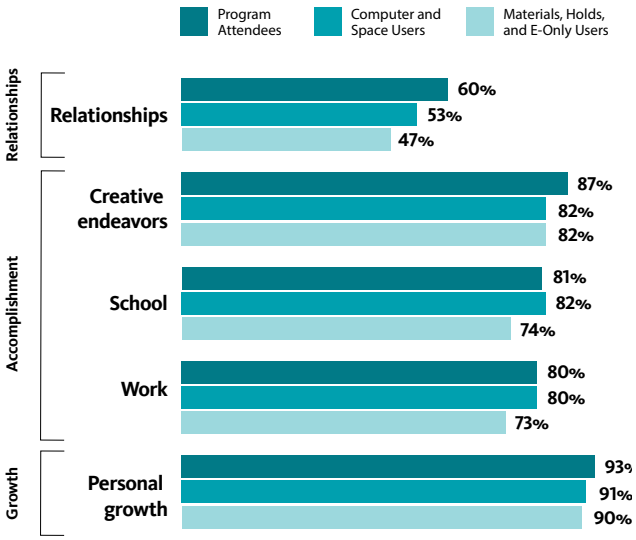
Goal Achievement

Finally, we examine differences in the Library's support of patron's goal achievement across respondents' usage types. These differences generally follow the aforementioned relationship in which the more physical and time-intensive the type of usage, the stronger the reported Library impact. Program attendees have the greatest percentage of respondents indicating that their use of the Library and its resources supported them in their goals, especially goals in the arena of relationships. Across all categories, the lowest percentage of respondents indicating that the Library and its resources supported their goals were the materials, holds, and e-only users.

Post-Visit Sentiment
By usage type



Goal Achievement
By usage type



Both analyses of the independent variables follow a strikingly similar pattern. Although the impact of Library usage on well-being is high across all groups of respondents, we see the highest impact for respondents who live in the lowest income ZIP codes of the Library's service area, and for respondents who use the Library in more physical and time-intensive ways. The differential impact is most apparent along the Relationships dimension and least different along the Engagement dimension across all types of measures. These two groups are not completely independent, as there is considerable overlap between one's sociodemographic status and the ways in which one uses the Library. Future work should aim to disentangle the specific mechanisms leading to these effects.

Where I can get my mind primed for when I get back to school... I started coming because I noticed that to get to a certain point in my life I needed to take certain actions, and the library provided that quiet space where I could do that and focus.

Discussion & Conclusions

Respondents to NYPL's patron survey overwhelmingly reported that their use of the Library and its assets—spaces, materials, staff, technology, programs, and other patrons—positively impacted their well-being. In their free-text responses, many patrons also acknowledged and appreciated that this impact extended beyond them, to benefit their families, communities, and New York City overall.

This work is descriptive and correlational—not causal—in nature; however, we believe these results provide meaningful evidence of the Library's role in supporting individuals' flourishing. These findings are a testament to public libraries' contributions to the health of their communities. As such, they point to the possible benefits of public libraries playing a more active and prominent role in discussions about the health and well-being of communities across the country. While the survey findings discussed here are specific to New York City, we believe it is likely that similar well-being effects could be found in public libraries in other urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the United States.

In recent years, public libraries across the country have had their activities, funding, and, in some cases, very existence threatened by budget cuts, calls for book banning, and attempts at politicization. Given this climate, the findings from this survey hold specific, urgent meaning both within New York City and beyond, because they show the full extent of what is at stake when communities face a loss of access to all that public libraries have to offer.

In their free-text responses, our patrons made clear that their sense of the Library as a stable resource they can rely on to be there for them is an essential precondition for the positive impact the Library has on their well-being. In 2023 and 2024, the New York, Brooklyn, and Queens Public Libraries experienced city funding cuts that led to a loss of Sunday service. While funding was ultimately restored a few months later, allowing for a restoration of those closed hours, real or threatened disruptions to service undermine libraries' perceived stability and reliability in the eyes of their patrons. Given this paper's findings, this erosion of stability could reduce the well-being returns that public libraries are able to generate for their communities.

Further, in communities across the country—including, in this year, New York City—public funding debates sometimes pit public library budgets against the need to invest more in public safety. Our survey findings can add nuance to this discussion as well. Respondents stated that NYPL locations **are** places of public safety—public spaces where they both feel safe, and are safe. As such, libraries should be seen as valuable contributors to any community's matrix of public safety.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this analysis come from two areas: sampling and measurement. Our sample consists of an online convenience sample and an in-person sampling strategy that was designed to be as representative as possible of the in-person visitors to 14 locations across NYPL's service area. However, our sample may not perfectly capture the underlying population of the NYPL patron base. It is possible that those who did respond to the survey and chose to answer the well-being questions have a strong relationship with the Library and an underlying desire to report positive impact along these measures.

Second, the ideal way of measuring impact is through a causal inference research design, rather than asking respondents to reflect on their perception of a program or organization's impact. By obtaining repeated measures of well-being indicators over time, or before and after a single library visit, and associating them with patterns of library usage, we could make a stronger case about a causal relationship between library use and flourishing.

While our conclusions are not causal, our analysis clearly demonstrates that respondents conceive of, and communicate about, the Library as an important contributor

to their well-being. Rather than dismissing or devaluing the felt experience of individuals, we argue that we should view it as important evidence in and of itself.

Future Research

The work presented here outlines a complex picture relating the use of public libraries to individual and collective well-being and broader flourishing. With these findings, we make the case for understanding the role of public institutions—and, specifically, public libraries—not only in their direct provision of services, but in what those services allow their users to achieve: their full potential.

These findings suggest multiple lines of further research to pursue, in order to fill in the initial outline we've sketched here, and to uncover mechanisms of impact that could ultimately lead to specific recommendations for interventions and policies. For example, how similar would these well-being findings from New York City look in other urban locations, or suburban or rural ones? Would different needs, resources, and lifestyles in different socio-demographic environments lead to different degrees or patterns of library impact on patrons' well-being? Can we better disentangle how different types of library usage are related to experiences of well-being? Is it the time-intensity of usage or the likelihood of interacting with others at the library that most directly, or most deeply, contributes to well-being effects?

Additionally, this work was more focused on how public library usage can be associated with higher levels of well-being, rather than with the alleviation of ill-being. Future research could explore how library use might mitigate negative mental health experiences and emotional suffering. Additional research could also go beyond psychological flourishing to explore the effect libraries have on other aspects of flourishing, including physical health, supportive communities, and care for the environment.

> *"[The Library] offers us hope that we can do something, that we can make a change, that we can advance. It gives us a chance to start again.*

Data & Methods

In November and December 2023, The New York Public Library fielded a survey focusing on our patrons' library attitudes and impact, behavior and awareness, and demographics. Survey distribution took two formats: an online survey accessible via the website and disseminated in Library newsletters, and a paper format, distributed via intercept strategy at select libraries across the NYPL system. NYPL consists of both branch and research libraries. Both research and branch library users were included in the sample, with alternative questions relating to their library usage corresponding to the type of library from which respondents were sampled.

Paper survey distribution was done via a multi-stage clustering sampling strategy. First, all branch libraries were clustered using the k-means algorithm into groups based on demographic data of each branch's service area and their library usage data from fiscal years 2023, 2022, and 2019. Demographic data included racial-ethnic demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status indicators, rates of access to technology and Wi-Fi, and the total population living in the library's service area. Library usage variables included values corresponding to library usage indicators, averaged monthly: check-outs, program attendance and sessions, computer sessions, and visits. Monthly average visits, program sessions, program attendees, median income, and service area population were log-transformed to account for right-tailed skewness. All metrics were scaled, such that each metric has a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 for purposes of model fit.

A k-means model with 4 clusters was selected as the best fitting model by assessing the extent to which branch libraries within a cluster were different from each other on these metrics. Two more clusters were added by hand due to their specific characteristics: first, branch libraries that serve as hubs for a borough or serve a specific purpose (e.g. Bronx Library Center, Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library) and the four research libraries. Libraries were then selected randomly, proportional to size, from the clusters, resulting in 15 branch libraries. The research library chosen for sampling—The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts—was not selected randomly but chosen by hand due to its unique role as serving as both a research library and a lending library. One selected branch library, Morris Park Library, was temporarily closed during the survey collection period so it was not included in the sample of in-person paper survey distribution. The table below displays the final in-person library sample, the borough in which each is located, and the general income level of its service area. Bronx Library Center and the Library for the Performing Arts do not have associated income levels, because they serve as hubs for larger communities.

Branch Name	Borough	Income Level
Harlem	Manhattan	Lower Income
Harry Belafonte 115th St	Manhattan	Lower Income
Mariners Harbor	Staten Island	Medium Income
Huguenot Park	Staten Island	Medium Income
Throgs Neck	Bronx	Medium Income
Morrisania	Bronx	Lower Income
Sedgwick	Bronx	Lower Income
Grand Concourse	Bronx	Lower Income
High Bridge	Manhattan	Lower Income
Epiphany	Manhattan	Medium Income
53rd Street Branch	Manhattan	Medium Income
New Amsterdam	Manhattan	Higher Income
Jefferson Market	Manhattan	Higher Income
Bronx Library Center	Bronx	Not Applicable
Library for the Performing Arts	Manhattan	Not Applicable

Periods of two-to-three hours during the primary week of survey data collection were proportionally sampled based on visit frequency statistics, and volunteers distributed surveys to incoming patrons initially on an interval strategy, depending on the estimated number of visitors to the library. After a relatively high refusal rate to take the survey, the interval strategy was removed and every patron entering the library during the two to three hour period was asked to take the survey. A link

and invitation to the online survey was available on the nypl.org website's front page throughout the survey period and sent out in weekly Library newsletters and on Library social media accounts. The survey was available in English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian, and Bengali. In total, there were 2,401 respondents to the survey, 1,765 to the online format and 636 to the paper version.

Format	Number of Respondents
Online	1,765
Paper	636

Variables

The survey was conceptualized as a comprehensive assessment of patrons' relationships with the Library. As such, it asked about a number of library usage, access, and impact areas. In this analysis, we focus on the library impact variables corresponding to dimensions of well-being as well as types of library usage and a respondent's area's income level.

Theoretical Variables & Method

The theoretical and mechanistic arguments of this paper rely on our analysis of responses to structured survey questions, combined with an analysis of one open-ended question in the survey: "How would your life be different without The New York Public Library?" One thousand six-hundred and forty-three participants responded to this question with valid answers. To analyze this question, we employed a mixed-methods approach, with two authors inductively coding the responses after reviewing all 1,643 comments and one author using a topic modeling approach. We landed on a three-bucket structure encompassing 20 different elements, displayed on page 8 and discussed throughout chapters 1, 2, and 3.

Dependent Variables

For the empirical testing of the relationship between library use and flourishing, we used three types of measures of well-being: perceived impact of the Library and its resources on elements of well-being, post-visit sentiment impressions, and the support of the Library in goal achievement.

Perceived Impact on Well-Being

Our first set of dependent variables are modified versions of the items on the European Social Survey used by Huppert & So (2013) to measure subjective flourishing across European countries. These items originally measured an individuals' level of well-being across the domains of flourishing, so we modified them to focus on the respondent's perception of how their usage of the library may have impacted how they felt along these dimensions. The wording of the question was as follows: "What sort of impact, if any, has your use of the Library and its resources had on..." with the options no impact, a small positive impact, and a large positive impact. There were a total of 11 items in a matrix format.

Due to the modifications of original items, and the novelty of introducing well-being concepts to a library context, these questions were tested in focus groups and interviews with patrons at branch libraries across NYPL to assess how they would be received by respondents to the survey.

Post-Visit Sentiment

Our second measure of well-being asks respondents to reflect on how they feel after leaving the Library. Emotion words were selected both a priori given our interest in well-being as conceptualized by Seligman (2011), but also supplemented by emotions provided by patrons through focus grops and interviews. Given the set of emotions: accomplished, engaged/stimulated, calm/peaceful, like I am on top of everything I need to do, seen and heard, and like I am part of a community, respondents chose a point along a seven-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so). We conceptualized this measure as a thermometer scale, in which if everyone selected "very much so" for an emotion or feeling, we would consider that achieving all of the possible points. The scale was shifted down by one point during the calculation of the metric.

Goal Achievement

The final measure of well-being pertains to how a respondent's use of the Library and its resources supported his, her, or their goals. Respondents were asked "Has the use of the Library's resources supported you in your:" school work, work or career, creative pursuits, personal growth, and relationships, with the options: no, yes, and does not apply to me.

Each of these dependent variables corresponded with a dimension of PERMA or the antecedent environmental

Question	Pre	P	E	R	M	A	G
Perceived Impact on Well-Being		■	■	■	■		
How positively you feel about yourself		■					
How much you love to learn new things			■				
How optimistic you are about the future		■					
The extent to which you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile					■		
How much energy you have			■				
The extent to which you feel that there are people in your life who really care about you				■			
How connected you feel to others				■			
How much you feel equipped to cope with the world		■					
Feeling like you are better informed about the world, culture, or current events					■		
Feeling more empathy towards others who may be different from you				■			
Having more appreciation for things you did not know much about before			■				
Post-Visit Sentiment	■		■	■		■	
Accomplished						■	
Calm/peaceful	■						
Like I am on top of everything I need to do						■	
Seen and heard				■			
Like I am part of a community				■			
Engaged/stimulated			■				
Goal Achievement				■		■	■
School work						■	
Work or career						■	
Creative pursuits						■	
Personal growth							■
Relationships				■			

Pre = Preconditions P = Positive Emotion E = Engagement R = Relationships M = Meaning A = Accomplishment G = Growth

conditions needed for PERMA or the resulting personal growth consequence of PERMA. The table above illustrates which dependent variables are associated with each category.

Independent Variables

The primary independent variables used in the synthesis part of our analysis were those corresponding to different types of library usage and demographic variables associated with socioeconomic status, particularly the income of the respondents' ZIP code. For the former, respondents were asked their relative frequency of particular library usage when they visited their NYPL library location, with the options never, every once in a while, sometimes, and most of the time or every time. The types of library usage asked about varied slightly depending on whether the library was a branch or research library, but all of the items could be split into several overarching types: materials (books, CDs, DVDs) usage, a subset of materials usage in which users placed items on hold to pick up, usage of library technology (computers and/or Wi-Fi), program attendance, and usage of library spaces.

These items were binarized to classify individuals as users of that type of library offering such that for materials and space usage, if a respondent said they did either sometimes or most of the time or every time,

they were classified as a materials user or a space user, respectively. Holds users are a subset of materials users who say they pick up materials they had placed on hold most of the time or every time. Because a smaller percentage of respondents tend to attend programs or use computers, these were binarized such that if a respondent indicated that they attended programs or used computers every once in a while, sometimes, or most of the time or every time, they were classified as program attendees or computer users, respectively. Respondents can fall into multiple types of usage depending on their responses and their depth of library usage. A portion of the online sample are our e-only users, who never come to physical NYPL locations and only use e-resources available from the Library in e-books/audiobooks and digital collections. These respondents do not fall into any of the other types of usage, as they only use the library electronically and never in person.

The second independent variable concerns the income level of a respondent. The survey did ask respondents to self-disclose their household's total annual income, but 30% of respondents who answered the question selected "prefer not to say." It is likely that those respondents who declined to answer the question were not evenly distributed across the income distribution, but rather fall on either extreme of the distribution. Due to this, we instead rely on the ZIP code of a respondent, drawing the median household income for that area from the 2021 American Community Survey five-year estimates. For those who did not provide their ZIP code, we first used their self-disclosed income, and then if they did not provide their income, we used the income of their branch's service area. These incomes were then categorized into three levels: lower-income, corresponding to under $50,000 a year, medium income, between $50,000 and $99,999 a year, and higher-income, above $100,000 a year.

Method

Because this is an exploratory, descriptive study of the perceived impact of library usage on subjective well-being, these analyses are themselves descriptive and not predictive. We report the percentages of respondents falling into perceived impact of library usage on dimensions of well-being, and then investigate how this relationship is different depending on a library user's type of usage and their income level.

Because this survey was entirely voluntary and not compensated financially, there was a fair amount of both item non-response and survey non-completion. For respondents who did not respond to the specific question being analyzed, we remove them from the sample for that item only. For example, if a respondent answered enough questions to be categorized as a materials user but did not answer the space usage question, they would still be included in the statistics for materials users but not space users: we did not do list-wise deletion across all items in the analysis, which would be typical for predictive modeling. Only those who did not answer **at least one** of the independent and dependent variables were excluded from the analysis, resulting in an analytic sample of 1,974 respondents. The following table shows the descriptive statistics of the analytic sample.

Descriptive Characteristics of the Analytic Sample

Variable	**N = 1,974**
Materials User	1,362 (73%)
Space User	879 (46%)
Computer User	858 (47%)
Program Attendee	971 (51%)
Holds User	777 (45%)
E-Only User	125 (6.3%)
Income	
Lower	377 (20%)
Medium	762 (40%)
Higher	754 (40%)
Survey Format	
Online	1,442 (73%)
Paper	532 (27%)

1 n (%)

The most common type of user was a materials user, with almost three-quarters of the sample, followed by program attendees, who comprise almost half of the sample. Next are computer and space users, falling slightly under half of the sample. The smallest group are our e-only users, who make up only 6.3% of the sample. This population is likely undersampled due to these users not coming to physical library locations or going on the website, but rather only accessing library materials through third-party apps such as Libby. A larger proportion of the sample comes from the online sample than the paper sample, with slightly more than a quarter of respondents taking the survey on paper through the multi-stage clustering strategy.

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The Humanities and Human Flourishing Project, Center for Positive Psychology, University of Pennsylvania

The Humanities and Human Flourishing Project seeks to understand, assess, and advance the effects of arts and humanities engagement on the flourishing of individuals and communities. It is situated within the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center, whose mission is to promote research, training, education, and the dissemination of positive psychology.

"The New York Public Library is central to my family's well-being and life.

—Patron, New Amsterdam Library

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